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ABSTRACT

The Workplace Education Initiative was created in Massachusetts to provide workers with the opportunity to develop basic literacy skills, to increase employer and union awareness of the extent of functional illiteracy among workers as well as its cost, to develop a number of partnership models that link the acquisition of basic education skills with increased opportunities for workers, and to promote strong ties among the education, training, and employment sectors at local and state levels. The initiative was developed in response to a growing recognition of the extent and impact of functional illiteracy in an increasingly complex workplace. With many plant closings, workers may be required to change jobs five or more times in a work life. In order to adapt to such frequent changes, workers need transferable skills. These skills are also needed in order for entry-level workers to advance. Lack of such skills results in lost productivity, poor product quality, and more accidents. Three partnership models were proposed to work toward solution of the illiteracy problem: (1) partnership models between a local business and local adult learning center or volunteer program to develop educational programs specific to the needs of the work force of that business; (2) partnership models between one or more local businesses, their unions, and a local adult learning center to develop jointly sponsored educational programs specific to the needs of that work force; and (3) partnership models between a local union that represents workers from a number of different businesses and a local adult learning center to develop educational programs specific to the needs of that work force. (Six programs were funded in 1986 and are summarized briefly in this paper.) (KC)

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THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ECONOMIC AFFAIRS
OFFICE OF TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT POLICY

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WORKPLACE EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

The Workplace Education Initiative included in the Governor's 8% Education and Coordination Grant is jointly sponsored by the Executive Office of Economic Affairs, the Department of Education, and the Executive Office of Labor. The goals of this joint initiative are:

1. to provide workers with the opportunity to develop basic reading, writing and computational skills and to earn the credentials, up to and including the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) or a high school diploma, necessary to upgrade their positions in the workforce, and to increase their earning power;

2. to increase employer awareness of the extent of functional illiteracy among workers and its costs in terms of low productivity, workplace accidents, absenteeism, low product quality, and lost management and supervisory time;

3. to develop understanding among unions of the extent of functional illiteracy among members and other working people and how inadequate reading, writing, and computational skills or lack of proficiency in English constitute serious social and economic barriers;

4. to develop a number of partnership models that link the acquisition of basic education skills with increased opportunities for workers, and that are appropriate for replication in a variety of community, union, and workplace settings;

5. to promote strong ties between the education, training, and employment communities, both at a statewide and local level, so as to increase the effectiveness of efforts to build the self-sufficiency of individuals and families.

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BACKGROUND: SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

This initiative was developed in response to a growing recognition of the extent and impact of functional illiteracy in an increasingly complex workplace. The dislocation of thousands of workers as a result of plant closings in older manufacturing facilities throughout the Commonwealth provided one of the early indicators of the extent of illiteracy in the workplace. Men and women who left school in their teens to work in the textile mills, shoe and apparel manufactures, and machine shops found themselves unemployed, fifteen to twenty-five years later, without sufficient reading, writing, and math skills to fill out a job application, let alone qualify for a job in a changed economy.

The rapid changes in the Massachusetts economy affect more than dislocated workers. According to the Division of Employment Security (DES), two-thirds of the employment growth in the last eight years has been in industries requiring workers with relatively high levels of educational attainment. Traditional manufacturing jobs are being replaced by jobs in the information services sector. And as the effect of the new technology is felt in other sectors of the economy, occupations that used to require primarily muscle power are being transformed so that they now require higher-level literacy skills. As a result, the job share of workers with less than a high school diploma has decreased from 34% to 17% in the past 15 years. As job functions continue to change, workers without sufficient literacy skills to learn or perform in new jobs will find themselves unemployed, apparent victims of technological advancement.

Experts now estimate that adults will change their jobs five or more times in a lifetime of work. This behavior contrasts sharply with expectations 15-20 years ago. In order to adapt to such frequent changes, workers need what we refer to as transferable skills: the skills in reading, writing, reasoning, and problem solving that enable a person to transfer what she knows to a new situation. Many extremely competent and diligent workers lack these skills. As a result, they will be unable to transfer their expertise to new jobs and will end up unemployed or underemployed, with a considerably reduced standard of living.

The lack of transferable skills also blocks the advancement of many entry-level workers. The increase in poverty across the state, in the face of decreasing unemployment, suggests that a significant number of workers are locked into low paying jobs. Indeed, thirty percent of all adults living in poverty in Massachusetts are employed. The income of these individuals and their families remains below the poverty level, however, as a result of seasonal work, part-time employment, and year-round, full-time work at low wages.

Immigrants and refugees make up a large percent of these working poor. Among the nearly 200,000 new arrivals in the past decade are many with a strong desire to work who lack sufficient English language skills to qualify for the more skilled, higher paying work that is prerequisite for economic self-sufficiency.

Reduced opportunities for individual workers is only half the story. A poorly educated workforce also has a negative impact on economic productivity. According to Harold McGraw, Chairman of McGraw-Hill, Inc., and founder of The Business Council for Effective Literacy:

> "Virtually all businesses today are adversely affected by the large numbers in their workforce with weak or nonexistent basic skills that result in lower productivity, poor product quality, lost management and supervisory time, and restricted mobility and promotability of employees. An estimated three-fourths of the currently unemployed are functionally illiterate, seriously reducing the pool of competent persons for new hires. And as potential customers, those who can't read are hardly likely to identify product labels or print advertising.

Because of the scope of the problem, McGraw urged other Chief Executive Officers to "give a higher priority to this problem among their many pressing corporate social responsibilities," and to join with both local literacy agencies and with local, state and federal government agencies in an integrated overall effort.

The need for such an integrated overall effort in Massachusetts was recognized by the Commonwealth Employment Forum. A group composed of leaders from

business, labor, government and the community, the Forum was created in 1985 to help define the basic principles for an effective employment policy in Massachusetts. They identified the lack of basic literacy skills as a primary barrier to employment, and proposed that:

> ...the Commonwealth (1) increase the emphasis on basic skills in the schools; (2) develop programs that demonstrate the relevance of education by combining work experience and education at the workplace and (3) offer incentives, in the form of grants and technical assistance, to firms that establish adult literacy programs as an employee benefit.

The Forum's emphasis on developing a statewide initiative that addresses the basic skills-employability nexus at every level places Massachusetts at the forefront of workforce literacy efforts nationwide. While there are a number of adult education-business/union connections that have been established across the country, most are discrete, local efforts that have had little impact beyond that specific situation. A recent study conducted by the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education for State Directors of Adult Basic Education identified 31 states in which adult basic education programs work with upwards of 4000 companies in providing basic skills training to some 156,000 learners, about 92,000 of which are company employees. "While there has been much activity," the study concludes, "this activity is as yet uncoordinated, and is unevenly distributed throughout the country."

THE MASSACHUSETTS SOLUTION: PROPOSED MODELS

The need to bring together those institutions, agencies, and individuals with expertise in providing literacy, English as a Second Language, and other basic education services to adults with those who have a direct investment in improving the skills of Massachusetts workers led us to propose the following partnership models for this initiative:

1. partnership models between a local business and local adult learning center or volunteer program to develop educational programs specific to the needs of the workforce of that business;

2. partnership models between one or more local businesses, the union that represents the workforce, and a local adult learning center to develop jointly sponsored educational programs specific to the needs of that workforce; and

3. partnership models between a local union that represents workers from a number of different businesses (eg. hotel and restaurant workers, home health workers) and a local adult learning center to develop educational programs specific to the needs of that workforce.

Each model will:

1. develop an educational program that links basic skills or language learning with competencies appropriate to a specific range of occupations or sector of the economy;

2. develop an educational program that links improvement in basic skills or English language fluency (eg. attainment of specific competencies) with advancement at the workplace; and

3. involve a commitment on the part of participating businesses to provide opportunities for advancement to employees who participate as well as to contribute resources such as time release for participating employees.

THE MASSACHUSETTS SOLUTION: PROGRAMS FUNDED IN 1986

In developing this initiative, our goal was to involve the private and public sectors in providing access to education that increases workforce productivity, enhances job retention, and enables workers to qualify for jobs that move them out of poverty. The six SDAs that received Workplace Literacy Grants this year proposed programs that represent a range of different approaches to achieving this goal. Over the coming year we will be looking at each of these model programs to see what we can learn about what works best. The results will be published so that others -- both in Massachusetts and across the country -- can profit from our experience.

Brief summaries of the six programs follow.

Hampden County - This SDA will operate two literacy programs in Springfield. The first, at Easco Hand Tools, has the active cooperation of both management and the union. Easco is retooling their manufacturing process, and the ESL and basic education program will enable workers to perform the more complex tasks necessary to participate fully in the new enterprise. The other

program will be at Baystate Medical Center, where many of the entry and low level employees speak little English. ESL classes will provide these custodial, security and food service employees with the opportunity to qualify for better paying jobs. Education at Easco will be provided by the Massachusetts Career Development Institute; ESL classes at Baystate will be developed by OWL, the Springfield Public School Adult Learning Center. Both Easco and Baystate will contribute time release for workers to attend classes as well as classroom space.

Lower Merrimack Valley - AT&T Technologies in North Andover will provide ESL instruction for assembly and production workers who are locked into their present jobs with little opportunity for advancement because of language and basic literacy barriers. The program represents a partnership between the City of Lawrence Department of Manpower Development, the Adult Learning Center of the Lawrence Public Schools, AT&T Management, and locals 1365 and 1366 of the Communications Workers of America. AT&T will provide time release to participating workers and intends to institutionalize the program the following year to expand services.

Metro North - This program will provide ESL and basic education classes to members of the Laundry and Dry Cleaning International Union, Local 66, working in three small laundries in the Greater Boston area and surrounding communities. The goal of the intensive ESL courses offered to this primarily female, minority immigrant workforce will be both to increase workplace safety, and to provide workers with an avenue to the more skilled, higher paying jobs necessary for economic self-sufficiency. Services will be provided jointly by staff of Employment Resources, Inc. and Local 66. Classroom space will be provided by the employers.

Metro South/West - The Zayre's Distribution Center in Worcester, a facility with over 800 employees, and the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) are jointly developing an English as a Second Language (ESL) program that will enable warehouse workers to acquire English language proficiency. The company intends to provide time release as well as classroom space. Educational services will be provided through the Adult Education Program at Quinsigamond Community College.

New Bedford - The Labor Education Center at Southeastern Massachusetts University, with the ILGWU, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU), and the United Electrical Workers Union (UE), will be holding ESL classes at a number of work sites and union halls. A unique feature of this program will be training union members as language coaches, which should help the unions develop a capacity to deliver some of these needed educational services.

Southern Essex - IUE/the Work Connection, a non-profit organization sponsored by the International Union of Electrical Workers, and Operation Bootstrap, a DOE-funded local adult learning center, will provide adult basic education classes to a group of electronic and assembly workers drawn from plants in Lynn, Saugus, and Salem.

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